An Introduction to Nuance Dragon NaturallySpeaking and Dragon Dictate

By Andrew Leib

You've probably seen those TV commercials for Nuance Dragon NaturallySpeaking, where a father, while ironing, dictates his romance novel. Such is the appeal of speech (or voice) recognition, a technology developed for persons with disabilities that now appeals to millions of mainstream users. Dragon NaturallySpeaking runs on Windows-based PCs. Nuance makes a largely similar program, Dragon Dictate, that runs on Mac OS X machines and iOS devices.

With Dragon, you talk, and it types. You attach a headset or wireless microphone to your computer, and once you train the program to recognize your voice, you can use it for many things, including:

- Writing papers
- Composing email (especially Gmail and Hotmail)
- Proofing text by hearing it read aloud
- Launching applications
- Browsing the web
- Using your iOS or Android device as a wireless mic

Dragon also has text-to-speech to read your words aloud to help you proof and edit text. Getting thoughts on paper faster is Dragon's "killer app" aimed at all users. For students with disabilities, speech recognition provides many features that can make your computer and the web more accessible and writing tasks easier. Here are a few examples:

- Dragon gives persons with mobility impairments – those who can't manipulate a mouse or press keys – access to most computer functions, especially communication and navigating web pages.
- Dragon can enable persons who are blind or visually impaired to navigate their PC and execute commands faster than with screen reading and magnification programs.
- For students with learning disabilities, features such as word prediction and text-to-speech help build vocabulary, eliminate spelling errors, and enhance literacy.

- For health care professionals, including doctors, nurses, and transcriptionists, Dragon Medical Practice offers a fast, efficient way to document care, providing vocabularies covering nearly 60 medical specialties as well as HIPAA compliance.

Getting Started with Dragon

Dragon NaturallySpeaking 12 starts at $99. You can purchase it or download a free 30-day trial on the Nuance website. Here are the minimal system requirements:

PC Users
- PC with a 2.2 GHz Intel dual core or equivalent AMD processor
- 2 GB of RAM
- 3.2 GB hard disk space
- Internet Explorer 7 or higher
- Nuance-approved noise-canceling headset microphone (included in purchase)

Mac Users
- Intel-based Macintosh running Mac OS X 10.6 Snow Leopard or later
- 2 GB of RAM (recommended)
- 3 GB hard disk space
- Internet connection for product registration
- Nuance-approved USB microphone (included in purchase)

The program is simple to set up: just insert the application CD, drag the icon to your applications folder, and double-click to install. Follow the prompts for inserting the Dragon data disk, registration, and accessing the Profile Creation Wizard. A profile is a voice sample you create by reading onscreen text aloud that familiarizes Dragon with your vocal tendencies to make dictation more effective.

To create a profile, follow the onscreen prompts, which include choosing a profile name, storage location, microphone, and spelling and accent (i.e. American or British) preferences.

Once Dragon has your data, click the microphone icon and read the text that appears onscreen in a clear, natural voice. This first reading enables Dragon to calibrate the volume.

Next, during voice training, you read a story aloud to teach Dragon how you pronounce words. Read exactly what appears, including words for punctuation spelled out in capital letters, e.g. COMMA, PERIOD. Words turn green as Dragon recognizes them. If they remain red, read them again. Dragon will indicate when it has gathered enough data to create your profile. You are now ready to start dictating.

Tip: Though straightforward, the steps for setting up Dragon follow one another. Budget sufficient time and energy to ensure best results.

Dictating Your First Documents

To start dictating, open Dragon and select your profile. Upon launch, Dragon opens a blank TextPad (PC) or TextEdit (Mac) document, though you can use any supported word processor.

Click the Stop sign in the status window to turn on your microphone.

Next, speak a few simple sentences and watch as the words appear onscreen.

For initial dictations, don't worry about speaking the punctuation. Just speak clearly and evenly as you would while talking with a friend.

Effective Dictation Demands New Habits

Though Dragon is fast (we speak three times faster than we write) and gets more accurate each time you use it, the transition from writing by hand or on a keyboard to dictation takes time and some new habits.

First, you'll have to learn to think about what you want to say before you speak. This will help clarify your thoughts, make you more articulate, and train you to speak in longer, more natural phrases – a key to both effective composition and for training Dragon to understand you better.

As you get comfortable dictating your thoughts, another habit you'll have to develop is speaking punctuation aloud as commands. This will feel strange at first, but you'll soon get used to it.

After getting a feel for speaking punctuation, you can start using voice commands to format text, e.g. "New line," "New paragraph," or "Scratch that."

Tip: As dictation is an acquired skill, plan to do additional voice training included in the program. The website also has an interactive tutorial that walks you through dictation, formatting, and editing exercises.

Popular Dragon Voice Commands

Here are some of the most common Dragon voice commands you'll regularly use:
- Dictating Text & Documents
- Wake up/Turn microphone on
- Go to sleep
- New line
- New paragraph
- Press the key Enter

- Press the key Return
- Press the key Tab.
- Capitalize "text" (through/to "text")
- Caps on/Caps off
- Move forward/backward (number) words
- Go to beginning/end
- Move to beginning/end of document

- Punctuation
- Comma
- Period
- Question mark
- Semi-colon
- Open parenthesis/close parenthesis

- Selecting, Formatting, & Editing Text
- Select "text" (through/to "text")
- Select next/previous
- Select all
- Copy selection
- Cut selection
- Paste from clipboard
- Undo last action
- Redo last action
- Read document
- Read the selection

- Controlling the Desktop
- Open (application name)
- Quit (application name)
- Close window
- Switch to next/previous application
- Search Mac/PC for (text)

There are additional commands for executing more Dragon functions and controlling other applications. Say, "Show available commands window" to see the full list of commands that work with Dragon, other programs, and anywhere within your operating system.

Dragon NaturallySpeaking is the flagship to an ever-expanding fleet of voice recognition programs. Nuance makes specific versions for professionals in the medical and legal fields. There are also mobile versions you can use on your smartphone, iPad, or tablet.

Resources:

Nuance Dragon NaturallySpeaking
http://www.nuance.com/dragon/index.htm

Dragon NaturallySpeaking in Action (video overview)
http://www.nuance.com/videoplayer/videoplayer.asp?p=/naturallySpeaking/dns12/&w=630&h=390&n=dragon12_inAction12_1&FileType=mp4

Dragon Medical Practice Edition
http://www.dragonmedicalpractice.com/?gclid=CMmf3IKXkrICFQjf4Aod0EUAHw

Dragon Voice Recognition Serves Many Disabilities An Interview with Nuance Dragon GM Peter Mahoney
http://assistivetechnology.about.com/od/SpeechRecognition/a/Dragon-Voice-Recognition-Serves-Many-Disabilities.htm

Is Speech Recognition Still Assistive Technology? An Interview with Nuance Product Manager Colleen Hendry
http://assistivetechnology.about.com/od/SpeechRecognition/p/Dragon-Naturallyspeaking-As-Assistive-Technology.htm

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